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STATE FOR SCA/CEN (PERRY)

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SUBJECT: INITIAL UK REACTION TO NIYAZOV'S DEATH

Classified By: Deputy Chief of Mission David T. Johnson for reasons 1.4
(B) and (D).

¶1. (C) Summary. The Foreign and Commonwealth Office intends a "correct, but very restrained" response to the death of Turkmen President Niyazov: No senior FCO official will travel to Sunday's planned funeral; the UK will likely be represented by the UK Ambassador and a short condolence message will be officially conveyed to Niyazov's family. There is no plan to issue an official FCO statement on the death; if asked, the FCO spokesperson will express HMG's condolences to the family and Turkmen people. Although aware Niyazov was not in the best of health, the FCO was surprised at his sudden death. The FCO is reading into the appointment of Deputy Prime Minister Berdymukhamedov as head the Funeral Commission a strong indication he will succeed as President. The UK Embassy in Ashgabat is reporting the situation is calm. There is no plan to change the UK travel guidance for Turkmenistan other than to note Niyazov's death. End Summary.

Official Condolences: Short and Simple

¶2. (C) Mike Walsh, head of the FCO's Central Asia office, told us early morning December 21, that, although final decisions on reaction to Niyazov's death were still pending further coordination with EU partners, the FCO's initial response will be correct, but "very restrained." No senior FCO official will attend Sunday's planned funeral; the FCO's preference would be for EU Special Envoy Morel to attend on behalf of EU members ("that is what these Special Envoys are for really"); the UK would be represented most likely by its Ambassador in Ashgabat. Walsh added, "no doubt Gazprom officials will make sure they are first in the receiving line at the funeral."

¶3. (C) Walsh's office had given thought to the UK expression of condolence -- it will be "short and sweet," and certainly "not contain any laudatory comments about his contributions" to Turkmenistan. The condolence message will be addressed to Niyazov's immediate family and the Turkmen people. There is currently no plan for the FCO to issue an official statement on the death; if asked, the FCO media spokesperson will make reference to the expression of condolence. The FCO is working to coordinate this aspect of its response with the EU in Brussels.

Berdymukhamedov Likely Successor

¶4. (C) Walsh acknowledged that London was still not sure to whom in the Turkmen Government the UK Ambassador would convey official UK condolences but likely to Deputy Prime Minister

Berdymukhamedov, as head of the Funeral Commission, or to the Foreign Minister. The FCO is reading into Berdymukhamedov's appointment to head the Commission a strong signal he will succeed as President, although Walsh said it was still not certain Berdymukhamedov would take over or that, if he did, he would remain long in the post. Given the relative suddenness of Niyazov's death, Walsh personally doubted other possible challengers had the opportunity to prepare the groundwork for an assumption of power.

15. (C) Although the FCO was aware Niyazov was not in the best of health, his sudden death from what appears to be a heart attack was still unexpected. Walsh said that EU Special Envoy Morel, who met with Niyazov on December 18, had reported back that the President had been "lively" during their meeting. Walsh said that the FCO saw no reason to suspect at this time, however, that the death was other than from natural causes.

Situation on the Ground Calm

16. (C) The UK Embassy in Ashgabat reported over night that the situation was calm in Turkmenistan. The FCO does not intend to change the wording of its current travel guidance for Turkmenistan, other than to include factual information on Niyazov's death and plans for the state funeral.

"Interesting Times" Ahead

17. (C) As for the future of a post-Niyazov Turkmenistan, Walsh -- who has been on the Central Asia account at FCO for over three years -- said it was still a "watch this space" situation. Walsh noted that, as he had told visiting SCA PDAS Steve Mann earlier this month, it was difficult to predict what would follow after a Niyazov departure. There is certainly an opportunity to press a new government on shared U.S./UK concerns about human rights and democracy, but pressing on these issues will take "some finesse." "Interesting time are ahead," he concluded.

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